



Report Highlights Need for Improved Communication with Spanish-speaking Residents in State Emergencies, Natural Disasters

Hartford, CT 8/20/15 – If Connecticut’s Spanish-speaking population is to be sufficiently informed of critical information related to a natural disaster or similar emergency occurring in Connecticut, state government needs to do more to ensure information is delivered promptly and accurately - and reaches residents.

In a report to the state legislature and Governor, highlighting results of a series of fact-finding hearings, the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC) has outlined a series of steps that should be taken.

The fact-finding initiative was prompted by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and anecdotal evidence that the way in which official government emergency information is conveyed to residents who do not understand English, was not as robust as it needs to be to ensure public safety.

“This report underscores the imperative to move from recommendations to implementation and highlights the important work of the Governor’s Task Force,” said Richard Cruz, Chairman of LPRAC. “The mission of LPRAC includes advising policy makers on quality of life desired results -including that ‘all members of the Latino and Puerto Rican population are safe.’ That is precisely the focus of this report,” added LPRAC Executive Director Werner Oyanadel.

The three fact-finding sessions, beginning in late-2013 and concluding in late-2014, were held at the initial urging of Dr. Jaime Gomez, Professor of Communication at Eastern Connecticut State University, and with the

assistance of Dr. Diana Rios, Association Professor of Communication at the University of Connecticut. Former LPRAC Commissioner Lourdes Montalvo was an early advocate for the initiative. Among the issues that were prominently raised throughout the fact-finding hearings:

- Local Spanish-language media should not be relied upon as the translator for official government information related to emergency situations.
- There should be a centralized list of Latino Media in Connecticut, easily accessible to all state agencies.
- There should be greater coordination among state agencies in the use of resources devoted to dissemination of emergency-related information.
- There should be an awareness of, and action to remedy, the wide variations among governments in the effectiveness of efforts to reach the Spanish-speaking population; driven by factors including whether the chief elected official or other emergency personnel are fluent in Spanish.
- There are generational, cultural and geographic differences in the way in which Spanish-language media is used and accessed in Connecticut.
- There should be regular assessment of actions and outcomes as it relates to communication of emergency-related information to the state's Spanish-speaking population.

Each of the hearings focused on a different aspect of the issues being examined: Spanish-language media; State and Local Emergency Communication; and Coordinating Public and Private Agencies. The report was unanimously approved by members of the Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission meeting on July 15, 2015.

“What I observed during Hurricane Sandy was the lack of some critical safety information being conveyed through Spanish media outlets. Or at least this was my impression. Days after the hurricane I spoke to some Spanish speaking community members and they told me they had a hard time finding information, before, during, and after the emergency,” said Jamie Gomez, Professor of Communication at Eastern Connecticut State

University. “This effort was undertaken to shed some light on emergency communication to the Spanish-speaking community.”

The report noted that the Governor’s Office, as the primary source of information in a natural disaster or similar emergency, should continue to expand and enhance its relationship with Spanish-language media. Just after the LPRAC fact-finding hearings began, Gov. Malloy appointed a Task Force to review the issue of emergency communication. The Task Force final report was issued in January, and contained a series of detailed recommendations, including many that are similar and consistent with the LPRAC report, to address concerns that have been raised. The Governor’s Task Force was led by the Commissioner of the Department of Homeland Security and Public Protection (DHSP) Dora B. Schriro.

“The fact-finding hearings undertaken by LPRAC, and the research and data developed by the Governor’s Task Force, present a body of information, experience and analysis that can and should be used by policy makers well before the next natural disaster, or other significant emergency, arises in Connecticut,” the report indicated.

The report outlines the views expressed by members of the Latino media in Connecticut, as well as state and local officials, and members of private organizations that provide emergency information. Key demographic data is also included, highlighting the number of residents that speak only Spanish, or a language other than English, in Connecticut.

“Taken together, these aspects will inform policy makers on the areas of responsibility, inherent limitations, and opportunities to improve and advance efforts to communicate effectively, accurately and promptly with non-English speaking populations in Connecticut, especially with the Spanish-speaking population, which is Connecticut’s largest such population,” the report said.

The report indicated that the state should review and consider the experience of other jurisdictions outside the State of Connecticut with considerable Spanish-speaking populations. In developing an inventory of Spanish-language media outlets in Connecticut, college radio stations and internet outlets should be considered, according to the fact-finding report,

and community-based organizations should be made aware of where to receive timely emergency information so they can provide further dissemination.

LPRAC, for the record, is a nonpartisan policy agency within the Legislative branch of government created in 1994 by an Act of the Connecticut Legislature. Under Public Act 09-07, the LPRAC consists of 21 appointed community leaders who are mandated to advise the General Assembly and the Governor on policies that foster progress in the Puerto Rican and Latino communities residing in Connecticut.

Copies of the report will be provided to the Governor and legislative leaders, and will be posted on the website of LPRAC at www.cga.ct.gov/lprac

For media related questions, please contact Bernard Kavalier (LPRAC) at 860-729-3021